

The Chief of Staff's Book of the Quarter

They Also Flew: The Enlisted Pilot Legacy, 1912-1942, Lee Arbon



When Sergeant Bob Van Ausdell tried to report for duty at Albuquerque Army Air Base, he was arrested by the military police for wearing pilot wings and

charged with impersonating an officer. When the provost marshal was satisfied that his orders and identity were legitimate, he said, "You mean to tell me you fly airplanes just like a second lieutenant?" "No sir!" replied Van Ausdell. "We fly them better."

Beginning in 1912, the newly created Aeronautical Division of the U.S. Army Signal Corps requested volunteers when it opened an aviation school at the newly established Fort William McKinley in the Philippines; however, only one officer stepped forward for pilot training. Recognizing an opportunity of a lifetime, Corporal Vernon Lee Burge also volunteered, becoming the first enlisted man in the history of United States military aviation to train as a pilot and earn his wings. As a reward he was promoted to sergeant. Over the next thirty years, 3,000 enlisted men would follow his lead. These men enabled the military to bring the number of pilots in its ranks up to combat strength.

Lee Arbon traces the history and achievements of enlisted aviators from their earliest days in flight through 1942. Right from the outset, these "sergeant pilots" struggled to earn their wings in a military organization that traditionally reserved pilot positions for commissioned officers. In fact, Burge's instructor pilot was scolded, "It is not the policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying aeroplanes." Burge retained his rating.

Lee Arbon argues that enlisted personnel were allowed to earn their wings to offset a shortage of officers entering the Signal Corps Aeronautical Division and later the Army Air Corps. They filled in the gaps when and where they were needed. They flew fighters, bombers, transports, and trainers during wartime, and some paid the ultimate price for their service. Between the wars, they were involved in air mail operations, aviation races, weather data flights, aerial acrobatic contests, and forest fire patrols. Many became instructor pilots and flight test pilots. As a result, many of their techniques and procedures

became standard operations for military and commercial flights. Despite their contributions and achievements, no new enlisted aviators were trained after 1933 until World War II, thus their numbers dwindled as retirements thinned their ranks.

As World War II approached, pilot training resumed for new enlisted personnel as the demand for pilots was at a premium. However, this action created animosity among those who wanted all pilots to be officers. As a consequence, most active duty enlisted pilots were ordered to extended duty as reserve officers. Jerome McCauley, for instance, was promoted to master sergeant in November 1940 and commissioned as a reserve captain the next month. Enlisted pilots were a dying breed, and in November 1942, the U.S. Army Air Forces concluded that upon graduation, enlisted aviation cadets would be promoted to the rank of flight officer, a new rank equivalent to warrant officer. In early 1943, the Army Air Forces ordered its commanders to promote all their flying sergeants to the new rank.

The era of enlisted pilots is over, but their legacy remains significant. Arbon, himself an enlisted airman who flew several combat missions in World War II, provides an account of men whose contributions to the development of American military aviation has been left largely unnoticed. These men persevered through World War I, the interwar years, and World War II, enduring bureaucratic discrimination while facing the hazards of flight and the dangers of aerial combat. Their selfless acts and outstanding conduct are worth attention; out of their ranks came 17 "aces," 11 generals, and more than 155 men killed in action. Lee Arbon provides a fascinating account of this proud group of military aviators, and his book is a "must read" for all Air Force members interested in exploring their heritage.

For more information and photographs of these remarkable men, please visit:

<http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/ep/ep.htm>

Editor's Note:

Each quarter, one of the books from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Reading List will be spotlighted as the book of the quarter. Air Force members of all ranks and grades are encouraged to read the featured title available at all Air Force libraries. For details on forming a book discussion group visit the CSAF's Reading List web site: <http://www.af.mil/readinglist>.

